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ABSTRACT

This case study presents Cornell University's use of campus surveying to gather information from stakeholders for strategic planning purposes. The case study emphasizes how survey creation, distribution, analysis, and reporting of findings was woven into the strategic planning process. Every step of the process, from item generation to the use of post-survey focus groups, was designed to maximize the legitimacy of the resulting data and raise the visibility of the strategic planning process within the university community. The overall process was closely monitored by a Strategic Planning Advisory Board comprised of students, employees, faculty members, administrators, community members, and an alumni/trustee. The Stakeholder Analysis Committee determined the major stakeholder groups and designed a survey instrument to be mailed. The survey of students, faculty, and staff members found that the majority of all three groups were satisfied with their relationship with Cornell. All three groups rated dedication to teaching as more important than dedication to research, while all three felt that the university's dedication to research actually guided operations. The survey also analyzed satisfaction with specific aspects of the Cornell environment, the extent to which Cornell follows its operating philosophy and values, and agreement with proposed university priorities. (JDD)

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Enhancing Strategic Planning Through Campus Surveys

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Jean Endo
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Enhancing Strategic Planning Through Campus Surveys

Abstract

This is a case study of one university's use of campus surveying to gather information from stakeholders for strategic planning purposes. Care was taken to weave the survey creation, distribution, analysis and reporting of findings into the strategic planning process. Every step of the process, from item generation to the use of post-survey focus groups, was designed to maximize the legitimacy of the resulting data and raise the visibility of the strategic planning process within the university community.

Enhancing Strategic Planning Through Campus Surveys

Introduction

The turbulence of the 1990s, with its fiscal uncertainties, demographic shifts, technological leaps in information processing, and quixotic public support increasingly calls for strategic priority setting in colleges and universities. Concurrently, there is a growing consensus in the management literature that the most effective organizations are those that instill a spirit of collective ownership of the organization's vision and priorities. The implicit challenge then is to seek broad and meaningful involvement in setting strategic priorities for the university.

At the most fundamental level, university leaders need to think about what specific groups hold a stake in the future of the institution, how satisfied these stakeholder groups are with current operations and services provided, and what they perceive to be the most important priorities or issues for the near future. Chait (1991) suggested that campus leaders "synthesize the prevalent views and ambitions of the campus community into a vision compatible with the college's culture and traditions. See where the herd's headed and nudge them in that direction." Without this information it is not likely that the organization will be able to satisfy its key stakeholders (Bryson, 1988) and this omission can easily sabotage a strategic planning process (Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeiffer, 1992).

This paper is a case study of Cornell University's use of campus surveying to gather essential information from stakeholders for strategic planning purposes. What may be most unusual about this case was the care taken to weave the survey creation, distribution, analysis and reporting of findings into the strategic planning process. Every step of the process, from item generation to the use of post-survey focus groups, was carefully designed to maximize the legitimacy of the resulting data and raise the visibility of the strategic planning process within the university community. The development of the survey, its findings, the communication of findings to the campus community, and their impact on the strategy setting process are all presented here.

Cornell University is a private research university that is also , by contract, the land grant university for the state of New York. It enrolls approximately 18,000 students annually. The planning process, initiated in May, 1992 is now nearing the completion of its first cycle. The overall process has been closely monitored by a 32 member Strategic Planning Advisory Board (SPAB), comprised of 3 students, 3 employees, 3 community members and an alumni/trustee as well as 8 faculty members and 15 administrators (deans, vice-presidents, the Provost, and the President)--

co-chaired by the President and the Provost of the University. The strategic planning process was designed to be inclusive, participative, issues-oriented, and iterative.

Preparing the Ground

Stakeholder feedback played an important role from the beginning of the strategic planning process. As a process for building common ground among the members of the SPAB, each member was asked to conduct 6 interviews with randomly selected students, staff, and faculty members. The interviewees responded to a set of six questions focusing on values and priorities. Their comments were written down by the interviewers and analyzed for major themes by staff members of the Institutional Planning & Research office (IPR). The same set of questions were used to capture the views of two hundred alumni members of the Cornell University Council during one of their regular, biannual meetings on campus. The results of the interviews were reported back to the SPAB members and became the basis for the stakeholder analysis surveys.

This preliminary step in the planning process met with some resistance but was of critical importance to the legitimacy of the stakeholder surveys and the overall strategic planning process. None of the SPAB members had regular interaction with all three groups--students, faculty, and staff--or a context for gaining varied, in-depth input on Cornell and its priorities. Doing the interviews broadened and deepened the interviewers' perspective on Cornell and helped to created a useful foundation for the information that they were later presented with from the stakeholder surveys. Finally, having the University's most active group of alumni respond to the same set of questions gave executive officers some advance notice of the sorts of strategic issues that were on the minds of alumni and what sorts of strategies might gain their support.

The Stakeholder Analysis Project

Four senior IPR staff members were joined by three faculty social scientists involved in ongoing survey research projects and the director of the Cornell Survey Research Facility to form the Stakeholder Analysis Committee. The committee's charge was to determine the major stakeholder groups; how to best gather their input in terms of satisfaction levels, what they valued about Cornell, and what they saw as Cornell's top priorities for the strategic planning process; and to draft the survey instrument.

Listing the stakeholders in a major, land grant research university is an interesting exercise in itself. Along with the core constituencies--students, faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees--other significant groups include, the general public (as well as their elected and appointed representatives), employers of graduates, parents of prospective and current students, a wide-range of users of the university's extension

services, and various sectors of the local community (local businesses, arts groups, etc.). The Stakeholder Analysis Committee discussion was framed by the need to obtain useful, reliable input from those who are most directly effected by how Cornell interacts with its changing environment, to generate the input cost-effectively, and to generate it rapidly enough to satisfy executives impatient with the long timeline of the overall planning process. Not surprisingly, we chose to focus on students, faculty, staff, and alumni as core stakeholder groups. We chose to do on-campus surveys of students faculty and staff and to use a recently completed COFHE *Class of '84 Follow-Up Survey* to give us a snapshot of alumni views.[1]

Our decision to use mailed surveys centered once again around time, money, a desire to include as many individuals in the planning process as possible, and a desire for representative data. All of those indications pointed to a mailed questionnaire as opposed to either a telephone survey or complete reliance on focus groups. At the same time we wanted to have a mechanism to explore the survey responses in more depth so we also planned to follow-up the surveys with nine focus groups with students, faculty, and staff each stratified by type, e.g., separate groups for undergraduates, graduate students, and professional students.

Item formation for the surveys was based on the SPAB interviews, the Cornell Council responses mentioned earlier, and other recent surveys of students, faculty, and staff. The three surveys that emerged had a substantial number of identical items so that we could compare the views of the major stakeholder groups as well as questions that were unique to each group. The items were constructed by the IPR staff member in charge of the survey project in consultation with other staff members and critiqued by the entire Stakeholder Analysis Committee. The faculty members and the director of the Survey Research Facility were particularly helpful at this point, lending a great deal of expertise to the process and heightening the legitimacy of the final product.

Once a complete draft of the surveys emerged from the Stakeholder Analysis Committee, they were reviewed by small subgroups of the SPAB. The multiple benefits of this step in the design process included reaction from a diverse sample of the university population (albeit skewed toward those with higher levels of campus involvement), enhancing SPAB ownership of the survey by including as much of their input into the survey as possible, and an early opportunity to face the rigorous questioning of faculty members on the SPAB (much better to do this before the survey is released than once the data come back). An interesting aspect of the SPAB review process was the attention placed on accessible language. It was pointed out to us by employee representatives on the SPAB that our wording of some items had made them potentially incomprehensible to a sizable segment of the employee population. This forced us to come up with language that was accessible to those with little formal

education but still compelling enough to invoke a response from professorial and professional staff.

Survey distribution and response rates

The campus surveys were designed and tested in Fall 1992 and distributed during Winter 1993. Sample sizes were largely dictated by our budget which allowed for approximately 3,000-3,500 surveys, including a postcard reminder and a second mailing of the survey to non-respondents. The determination of sample sizes for the individual stakeholder groups (students, faculty, staff) was less straightforward. We could have taken proportional representation from the three groups but with 18,000 students 6,000 staff and 2,600 faculty members that would have given us a smaller sample of faculty than we were willing to take. Our thinking about this was as follows: The students are our "customer" and we need a representative sample of them to get valid measures of satisfaction. Faculty and staff on the other hand are non-transient groups that must "buy-in" to the strategic plan for it to be effective. Therefore we wanted to "over-sample" these groups to include input from as many of them in the strategic planning process as possible.

Based on these assumptions, surveys were sent to 1,500 students, 1,000 faculty, and 800 staff members with a cover letter from the President of the University. We over-sampled students from smaller schools and colleges so that we could make valid comparisons across academic units and used unstratified random samples of faculty and staff. A reminder postcard was sent from the Provost ten days after the survey went out and a second survey with a cover letter from the Vice-President for Planning was sent two weeks after that to non-respondents. Response rates were excellent from faculty (75%) and staff (79%) and acceptable from students (56%). The COFHE alumni survey was sent to the entire graduating class of 1984 (n=2312) and had a 42% response rate. Survey responses were entered into an SPSS file at the Survey Research Facility and data analysis was done by the Institutional Planning and Research office. An overview of the findings is presented in the following section.

Findings

Satisfaction We asked all three stakeholder groups, "In general, how satisfied are you as a...(student, faculty or staff member) of Cornell?" Table 1 shows the responses in terms of frequencies The clear majority of all three groups reported being satisfied with their relationship with Cornell. On the other hand, the fact that 26% of the students, 35% of the faculty, and 42% of the staff chose not to indicate that they were satisfied suggests considerable room for improvement.

Table 1. Satisfaction

Stakeholder Group	Dissatisfied to Very Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied to Very Satisfied
Students	7%	19%	74%
Faculty	11%	24%	65%
Staff	13%	29%	57%

Along with the question on general satisfaction, students, faculty, and staff were asked to rate their satisfaction with specific aspects of the Cornell environment that were likely to be important to them. We wanted to know which of these elements were most and least highly associated (correlated) with overall satisfaction[2]. The results of this analysis are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Elements Most Closely Associated with Overall Satisfaction

Students	Faculty	Staff
Professors' teaching ability	Salary	Having others appreciate me
Peer relations / friendships	Academic facilities	Being able to speak my mind
Shape my own program	Working relationships	Can learn to do my job better
Quality of student services	Sabbaticals, fellowships, etc.	Salary

Table 3. Elements Least Associated with Overall Satisfaction

Students	Faculty	Staff
Community involvement	Technical computer support	Benefits package
Avail. computer technology	Spouse employment	Having the right technology
Affordable housing[3]	Secretarial / clerical support	Able to balance work, family

<u>The Balance of Academic Activities</u> The University's relative emphases on teaching, research, and outreach/public service was explored in several sections of the strategic planning survey with dramatic results. In a section on Cornell's operating philosophy and values, respondents were asked to first, rate the importance of dedication to teaching, research, and outreach/public service, and second, to rate the extent to which this dedication guides operations. The results are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Importance of Dedication to Teaching, Research, and Outreach

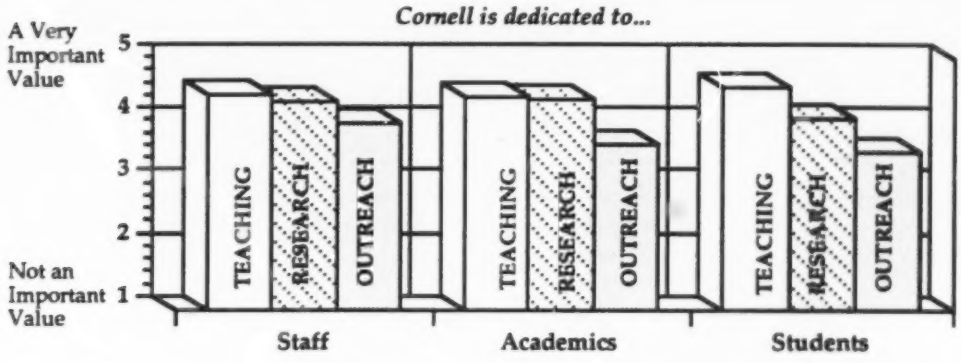
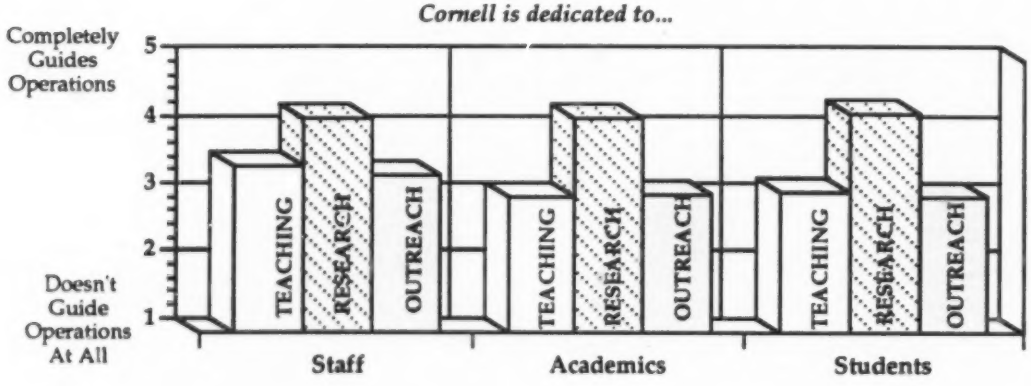


Figure 2. Extent that Dedication to Teaching, Research, and Outreach Guide Operations

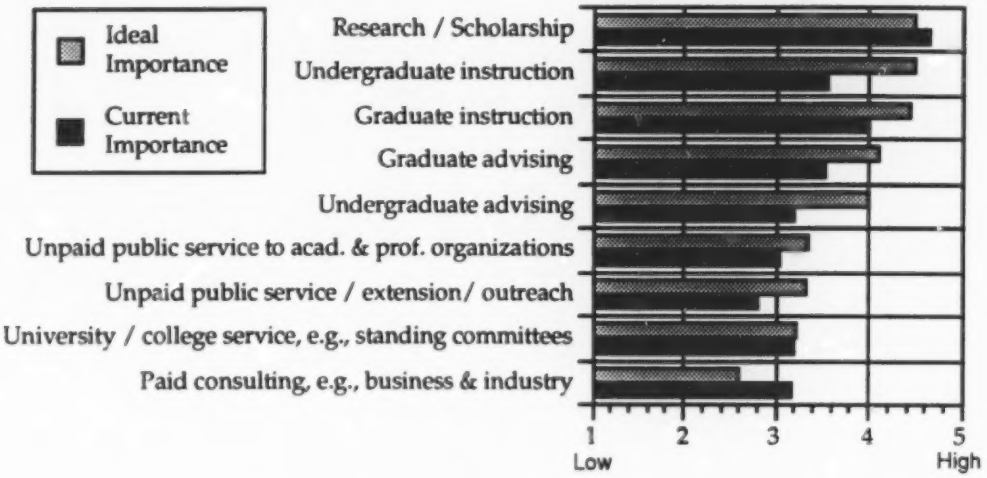


To a greater or lesser extent, all three groups rated dedication to teaching highest, followed closely by dedication to research and placed less importance on Outreach/Public Service as organizational values (Figure 1). In contrast, Figure 2 reflects the common perception that the University's current dedication to research plays the strongest role in guiding operations while teaching and outreach/public service have less impact on operations.

The need to redress the balance of teaching and research was also reflected to some extent in the final section of the surveys, "Priorities for the University." Respondents rated twenty priorities in terms of their importance and were asked to pick the five most important priorities. Both students and faculty chose "increase the emphasis on teaching relative to research" more often than any of the other priorities on the list (this section is presented more fully later in this paper.)

Further evidence in support of a re-examination of the relative importance of these academic activities comes from the Faculty Survey. We asked academics how much importance Cornell currently appears to place on these activities and how much ideally should be placed on them. The results are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Relative Priorities Among Academic Activities



The faculty respondents perceived the University as placing the greatest importance on research, followed by graduate instruction, undergraduate instruction, advising, and various types of outreach and service activities. Their preference however was that the University give research and instruction (both graduate and undergraduate) equally high priority. They saw graduate and undergraduate advising as occupying a second level of importance with outreach activities including college and university service occupying a third level. The only activity that the faculty thought should be considerably de-emphasized was paid consulting to business and industry.

Other interesting findings on undergraduate instruction came from the COFHE Class of '84 Follow-Up. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of 26 educational outcomes in their lives today and to rate the amount of gain that they received in these areas from their undergraduate education. Data from these items provided information on how well we educate our undergraduates (relative to peer institutions) in the areas that they are likely to find most important after they leave college. Table 4 gives the percent of respondents who said that each outcome was "essential" (the highest category) and Cornell's rank among the 13 COFHE institutions in terms of the percent of respondents who said that they gained "very much" on the outcome during their undergraduate education.

Table 4 . Gains On Outcomes of Undergraduate Education
Relative to Their Perceived Importance Today

	Outcomes	% Cornell Importance = "Essential"	% Cornell Gain = "Very Much"	COFHE 13 Rank Gain = "Very Much"
	Independent Learning	70%	38%	8
	Analytical Thinking	69%	41%	7
	Writing Clearly	66%	29%	11
More	Getting Along With Others	61%	28%	7
Important	Understanding Yourself	60%	28%	7
	Developing Values	54%	22%	9
	Creativity & Originality	53%	16%	10
	Speaking in Groups	47%	17%	6
	Function as a Team Member	44%	15%	2
	Leading Groups	43%	13%	2
	General Education	35%	32%	11
	Cultural Awareness	32%	22%	11
	Quantitative Thinking	27%	19%	1
Less	Vocational Training	26%	21%	1
Important	Importance of History	26%	14%	7
	Experimental Science	24%	23%	2
	Science & Technology	22%	18%	1
	Knowledge of the World	16%	8%	11
	Arts Appreciation	16%	11%	11
	Knowing Literature	16%	13%	12

The order of importance matches closely that of the 13 other institutions that participated in the survey. The more generic abilities of analytical thinking, independent learning, writing, self-understanding, etc. head the list while the areas of Cornell's traditional strengths--quantitative skills, science and technology, vocational training--all appeared to be less important to these alumni. General education and traditional liberal arts were also deemed less important. Relative to the other institutions, Cornell alumni appear to have received the greatest educational gains in areas of less importance to them today. Of the seven outcomes that 50 percent or more of the Cornell respondents agreed were essential, Cornell ranked no higher than 7th.

These findings were presented to the SPAB as inconclusive, but suggestive that further study of the outcomes of undergraduate education at Cornell would be appropriate.

Operating Philosophy and Values One entire section, common to all three strategic planning surveys, was devoted to exploring the extent to which Cornell successfully follows its operating philosophy and values. The items in this section were based on the University's statement of mission and principles, the Cornell Campaign statement, and the mission and values of the Quality Improvement Process (QIP). Subtracting the extent that an organizational value guides operations from its rated importance as an organizational value produced a "gap" score[4]. Some gap is to be expected between the ideal importance of an organizational value (vision) and the extent that it guides operations (reality). However, it is useful to view organizational values relative to each other in terms of this "gap." Where has the University been most successful in manifesting its vision?

As discussed earlier, the University's dedication to research guides operations more fully than its dedication to either teaching or outreach/public service. In terms of dedication to research, faculty and staff indicated very little gap between vision and reality. Students actually rate the extent that research guides operations higher than its importance. This is the only value that comes close to having a match between vision and reality. Dedication to research guides operations to a greater extent than any of the other 15 values--a reasonable outcome for a research university.

The gap scores range from approximately zero (dedication to research) to approximately 1.8. Looking at this range in equal thirds, dedication to research is the only value that is in the top third(0-.6). Most of the value gaps fall into the middle third from (.6 to 1.2). The value gaps that fall in to the bottom third (1.2 to 1.8) are listed below in decreasing order.

Table 5. Largest Gaps Between Organizational Values and Perceived Reality

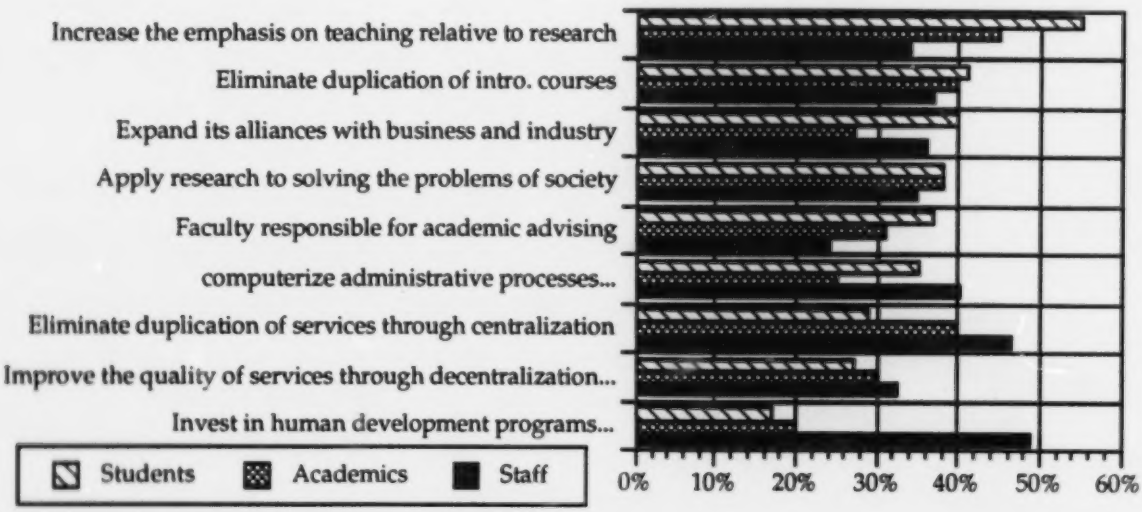
Students	Faculty	Staff
Exists first for students	Exists first for students	Recognizes & rewards performance
Dedicated to teaching	Dedicated to teaching	Includes views of others
	Includes views of others	Respects individuals
	Recognizes & rewards performance	
	Integrity in decision making	

These findings indicate that the greatest gaps between the University's vision and its perceived operating reality lie in the area of how it regards individual students,

faculty, and staff. It appears that across all three stakeholder groups, there is a perception that individuals are not sufficiently recognized, respected, or included.

Action Priorities The final section of all three surveys asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they were in agreement with each of 20 proposed university priorities. At the end of the section respondents were asked to list what they considered to be the five highest priorities. Percents were calculated based on the number of respondents who chose each of the priorities as one of their top five. Figure 4, shows those items that were mentioned by at least 35% of one of the three groups.

Figure 4. Top Priorities for Institutional Action for Students, Faculty, and Staff



The graph highlights some of the areas of agreement as well as some of the tensions between the views of the three groups. As indicated earlier, a desire to increase the emphasis on teaching relative to research was number one for both students and faculty. Staff agree most with investing in human development programs, something that is not strongly supported by the other two groups. There was strong agreement to eliminate duplication in the teaching of introductory courses but there was also strong agreement that increasing class sizes is not a priority. Other items that received little support from any of the groups were "Recruit a more racially and ethnically diverse student body," "Change the financial aid policy to contain costs...," and "Aggressively pursue the internationalization of programs."

Dissemination

The findings from the stakeholder survey project were disseminated to the campus community through articles in the campus newspapers, mailings to the Board of Trustees, Cornell Council of Alumni, deans, directors, and department heads. Within the planning process itself, the most critical moment for the stakeholder project was the presentation of the findings to the SPAB. This was the point at which our early efforts to get buy-in to the survey instruments became extraordinarily useful. Being able to preface the presentation by reminding the SPAB members that the surveys were based on their own interviews with members of the campus community, that they had reviewed the instruments themselves, that the survey design process had been carried out under the expert eye of faculty, and that the response rates were strong went a long way toward countering resistance from those who were not pleased with the results.

The data gathered on stakeholder views through the surveys were combined with information gleaned from seven study groups charged to surface major issues around mission-related themes. All of this material was then used to create a short list of university issues. Four task forces were then charged to explore these issues in depth, setting long-range objectives, shorter-term goals and strategies for implementation. For example, one of the most striking findings from the surveys was the existence of strong support for increasing the emphasis on teaching relative to research across all stakeholder groups, including tenured faculty. Students and faculty placed the need to change this emphasis among the top five priorities for the University more often than any of the other 19 priority statements submitted to them. This finding found its way on to the short list of issues for two of the task forces.

One anecdote about dissemination might be useful. The alumni survey findings included low rankings for us among peer institutions on some specific educational outcomes (Table 4). These data had been presented at the institutional level as it was not possible to identify the responses by individual academic units, only by major (a categorization that is not at all definitive at Cornell, e.g. a student can be an economics major in any one of four Cornell colleges).[5] One of the SPAB members, a dean of one of the larger Cornell colleges and chairman of one of the strategic planning task forces, was less than enthusiastic about these findings. His staff came up with a series of possible weaknesses in the data and alternative interpretations of the findings.

Since the dean as task force chair could choose to include or not include the data in task force discussions, a focused attempt was made to gain his support. This involved several meetings with the dean and his analytical staff to discuss the issues. Once we realized the problem that the dean was having--the low scores reflected poorly and inappropriately on his unit--we put together a collection of majors that approximated his unit and found that his intuition was correct; alumni from his college

actually scored much higher than the mean on the specific outcomes in question. The result was that the dean went from being an obstacle to a supporter of the data.

Conclusion

Looking through the 'retrospectroscope', the stakeholder analysis appears to have played an essential role in the overall strategic planning process. While the experiences and intuition of individual decision makers is critical to strategy making (Mintzberg, 1994) data that is truly representative of stakeholder concerns can provide an agreed upon basis for discussion in what is often a highly politicized environment. While the survey results did not translate directly into an action plan, they were referred to at key points throughout the process and lent courage to decision makers to tread in sensitive areas (e.g. the tenure system, emphasis on teaching, focus on undergraduate education).

The campus surveys also provided us with a number of other benefits. Sending the survey out to 3,300 individuals gave us a chance to tell them about the strategic planning process and the role that they could play. Many of them expressed their pleasure and gratitude in having been asked for their views. The surveys also gave us a stronger basis for discussing the priorities of the university with its Board of Trustees and Alumni.

The stakeholder survey project was a success for us because we paid attention throughout the process to who our audience was and what it would take to make the survey results legitimate in their eyes. As our primary audience was the SPAB, the thrust of our concern was in using their input in as many ways as possible in constructing the survey items and in explicitly seeking faculty expertise and approval in the design of the survey instruments. If we had to redo the strategic planning process at Cornell there are some adjustments we would make but the stakeholder analysis project is a piece that we would repeat with confidence.

Endnotes

[1]COFHE is the acronym for the Consortium on Financing Higher Education which consists of private colleges and universities and regularly surveys students and alumni from these institutions. The Class of '84 Follow-Up was conducted in 1991.

[2]Most and least associated with overall satisfaction is not the same as most and least satisfied.

[3]Affordable housing was the area with the greatest discrepancy between level of importance and level of satisfaction. However, it appears from the above that students don't include this in their overall satisfaction.

[4]The maximum "gap" is 4.0 (5-1). Negative gaps were also possible but occurred for only "dedicated to research" from the student perspective.

[5]Our inability to identify responses by college was our mistake and not an inherent weakness in the COFHE surveys. As we quickly learned, if you can't link the responses to individual academic units (schools and colleges) no one will take ownership of the results.

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